AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

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SAUDI ARABIA: CIVIL SOCIETY DEMANDS ACTION AHEAD OF INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUM

We, the undersigned human rights organizations, urge the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to release people imprisoned for their online expression and foster transparency and accountability, ahead of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2024 hosted in Riyadh between 15 and 19 December.

Over two months ago, on 6 September 2024, more than 40 civil society organizations called on Saudi Arabia to immediately release all people arbitrarily imprisoned for their online speech. However, these demands have not been met yet. As the IGF approaches, the systematic digital repression in Saudi Arabia — this year's host country — stands in stark contradiction to the forum's principle of fostering inclusive digital spaces and its consistent support for human rights. The Saudi government continues to escalate its crackdown on freedom of expression, targeting human rights defenders, women's rights activists, and journalists, with some receiving lengthy prison sentences of up to 45 years for expressing dissent online. Authorities have also abused surveillance tools, including the infamous Pegasus spyware, to monitor and target critics and dissidents both within and beyond Saudi borders, exemplifying the Kingdom's extensive transnational repression.

The record breaking number of executions in Saudi Arabia this year reflects a deepening human rights crisis. The execution of over 300 people, including more than 100 foreign nationals, underscores the kingdom's disregard for due process and fundamental freedoms.

Saudi authorities routinely engage in arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, and severe sentences targeting those who exercise their right to free expression online. The case of Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi and his brothers demonstrates how state repression creates a chilling effect, deterring others from exercising their right to free expression. Initially sentenced to death for critical posts on his X and YouTube handles with an audience of just 10 followers, Nasser's sentence was commuted on 24 September 2024 to 30 years in prison. While the commutation is important, his lengthy arbitrary detention continues to constitute a grave injustice that highlights the severe crackdown on freedom of expression. The following emblematic cases further highlight the extent of repression in the country:

- Osama Khalid: a medical doctor and Wikipedia administrator serving a 32-year sentence on charges of "swaying public opinion" and "violating public morals."
- Ziad al-Sufiani: a podiatrist and Arabic Wikipedia administrator, arrested for contributing to and editing wikipedia pages, like that of women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul.
- Manahel al-Otaibi: a fitness instructor and women's rights activist sentenced to 11 years after a secret trial with due process violations for online posts supporting women's rights and Snapchat photos without an abaya.
- Salma al-Shehab: a PhD student and mother of two serving a 27-year sentence and travel ban following a grossly unfair trial for tweets supporting women's rights.
- Abdulrahman al-Sadhan: a humanitarian worker forcibly disappeared in 2018 and sentenced to 20 years in prison for satirical tweets, based on a confession extracted under duress.
- Loujain al-Hathloul: a women's rights activist and one of Saudi Arabia's most prominent critics, who was targeted with NSO spyware in 2017, and later arrested, tortured, and imprisoned after being deported from the UAE in 2018.

These cases are part of the Saudi government's broader strategy to suppress dissent and control online narratives. Such repression of fundamental human rights inherently contradicts the IGF's mission to promote open discussion on human rights and inclusivity in the digital age. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is courting Big Tech investments under the pretence of "creating a vibrant society" under the country's Vision 2030, while simultaneously silencing those opposing it, as in the

case of Asaad al-Ghamdi, a Saudi teacher, who was sentenced to prison for criticizing the vision of the Saudi Crown Prince. This also raises significant alarm about tech companies' complicity in human rights violations in the country. Companies like Google, Microsoft, and Amazon continue to partner with the Saudi government, despite the lack of safeguards to mitigate risks in a country notorious for systematic repression and lack of judicial oversight.

Meanwhile, fears of surveillance, harassment, and reprisals deter meaningful participation by civil society at this year's IGF. The lack of safety guarantees for participants diminishes the IGF's role as a vital multi-stakeholder space where civil society plays an indispensable role in tech policy discussions.

In a couple of days, Saudi Arabia is poised to lead discussions on the future of digital governance while simultaneously silencing critical voices, online and offline. Unless urgent steps are taken to address these violations, the IGF risks becoming a platform for legitimizing repression.

We, once again, urgently call for:

1. **The release of all prisoners of conscience:** Saudi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release all individuals imprisoned for their online expression, including the six emblematic cases highlighted in our initial statement.
2. **Guaranteed safety at the IGF:** implement transparent measures to ensure the safety and freedom of participation for all IGF attendees, particularly civil society representatives, and protection from reprisal and transnational repression once they return home.
3. **Saudi Arabia to be held accountable:** IGF participants — including states, international organizations, and individuals — must publicly advocate for the release of detainees and address the ongoing human rights crisis during the forum.

Hosting the IGF in Saudi Arabia without addressing these demands undermines the forum's mission and enables the Saudi government to exploit this platform to whitewash its egregious rights violations. We call on the international community to stand in solidarity with the victims of repression in Saudi Arabia. The IGF must not serve as a tool for legitimizing oppression but rather as an open platform for advancing justice, human rights, and meaningful inclusivity.

SIGNATORIES

Access Now

ALQST For Human Rights

Amnesty International

ARTICLE 19

CIVICUS

DAWN

Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)

FairSquare

Freedom House

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

Human Rights Watch

Index on Censorship

INSM for Digital Rights- Iraq

Kandoo

Masaar, Egypt

Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)

Open Net (Korea)

SMEX

Tech Global Institute

The Future of Free Speech